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AUTHOR Billings, Barbara L.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of ethnicity on individual differences in achievement goals in a replication of the paradigm used by P. Smiley and C. Dweck (1994) to explore individual differences in achievement goals held by young children. The emphasis was on learning goals, which focus effort on mastering new tasks, and performance goals, which focus effort toward documentation of ability. Participating in the study were 39 Caucasian and 39 Hispanic kindergarten children enrolled in 6 public schools in Idaho. Subjects were asked to solve puzzles of cartoon characters, with some of the puzzles altered to prevent successful completion. Children were then asked to choose between additional challenging or no-challenge tasks. Based on their preferences for challenging versus no-challenge puzzles and their reasons for so choosing, children were categorized into learning and performance goal groups. The findings indicated that the proportions of Hispanic and Caucasian students holding learning goals were almost identical. Twenty-one (54 percent) Hispanic children held learning goals, and 22 (56 percent) Caucasian children held learning goals. Kindergartners' preferences for learning or performance goals did not vary by ethnic group. There was an unexpected effect of gender on goal preference, such that 60 percent of males preferred performance goals, with the remainder preferring learning goals; these preferences were reversed for females, with 33 percent holding performance goals and 67 percent holding learning goals. The same pattern was observed in both the Hispanic and Caucasian ethnic groups. (KB)

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Ethnicity and Individual Differences in Achievement Goals in Kindergarten Children

Barbara L. Billings
University of Idaho

Barbara L. Billings

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Abstract

The effect of ethnicity on individual differences in achievement goals was examined in a replication of the pardigm used by Smiley and Dweck (1994) to explore individual differences in achievement goals held by young children. Learning goals focus effort on mastering new tasks while performance goals focus effort toward documentation of ability. Kindergarten children (N=78) 39 Caucasian and 39 Hispanic, were asked to solve puzzles of cartoon characters with some of the puzzles altered to prevent successful completion. They were then asked to choose between additional challenge and no-challenge tasks. The proportions of students holding learning goals in Hispanic and Caucasian groups were almost exactly the same. Twenty-one (54%) Hispanic children held learning goals and 22 (56%) Caucasian children held learning goals. Results indicate that kindergartners' preferences for learning or performance goals did not vary by ethnic group. There was an unexpected significant effect of gender on goal preference.

Introduction

According to the theory of achievement motivation developed by Dweck and her colleagues (Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Smiley & Dweck, 1994), some children seek to perform well in order to appear capable both to themselves and to others, while other children strive for mastery over learning tasks. Learning goals focus effort toward mastery of new tasks, while performance goals focus effort toward documentation of ability.

Smiley and Dweck (1994) used an age-appropriate task to document such individual differences in achievement goals in children as young as 4 and 5 years. Their subjects were primarily Caucasian, urban, and from middle- and upper-middle-class families. This study is a replication of that pardigm.

The present study was designed to compare the proportions of children holding learning and performance goals in two ethnic groups, Caucasian and Hispanic. A second goal of the study was to explore whether the patterns of achievement goals found by Smiley and Dweck would generalize to varied geographic, socioeconomic, and ethnic groups.

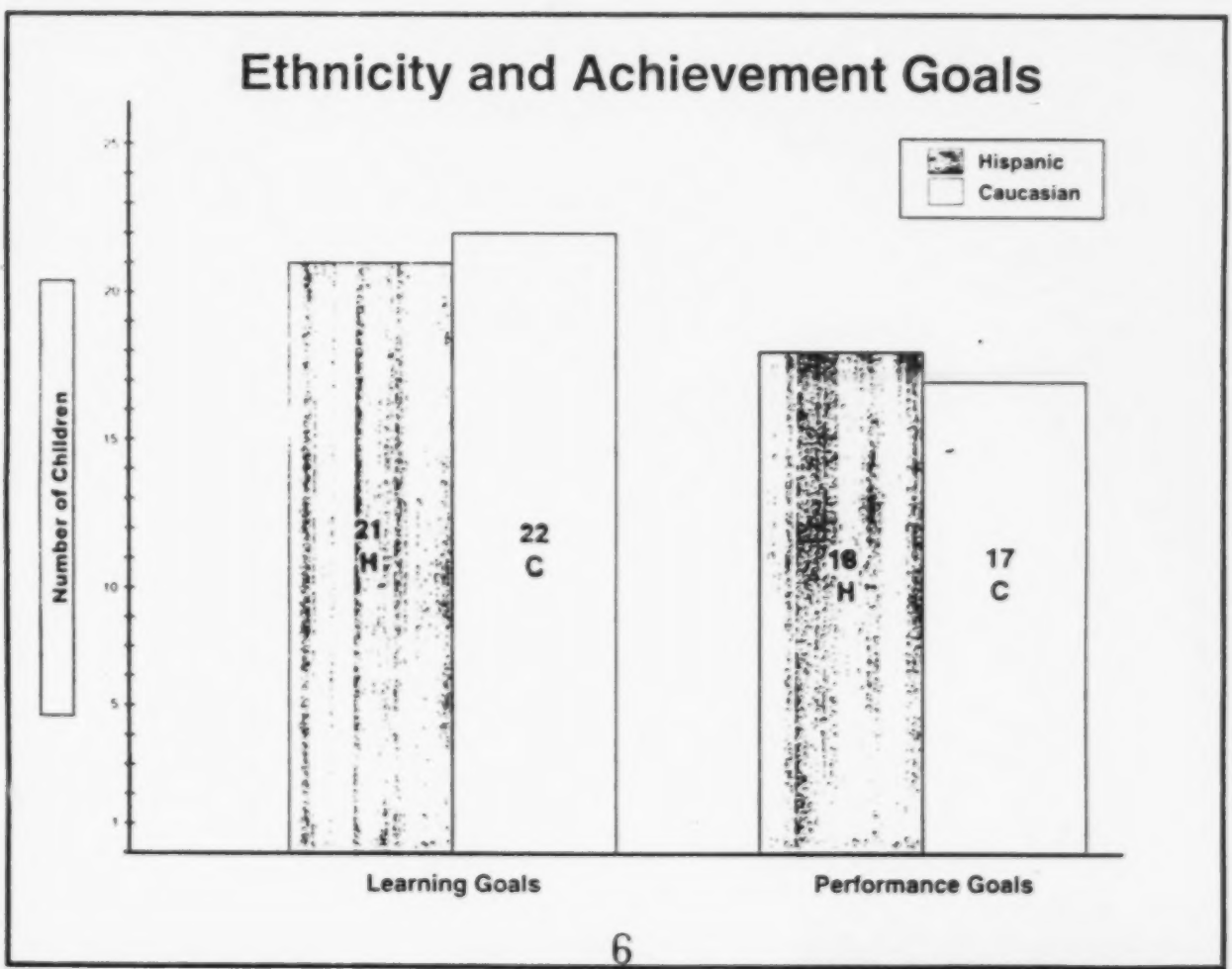
Method

Participants were 78 kindergarten children, 43 females and 35 males, enrolled in six public school kindergartens in Canyon County, Idaho. The attendance area for the schools encompassed rural and small town areas with socioeconomic status in the middle and lower ranges as obtained from U.S. Bureau of the Census records and school lunch subsidy figures. Thirty-nine children were of Hispanic ethnicity and 39 were of Caucasian ethnicity.

The experimental paradigm consisted of two parts, a pretest and the main puzzle-solving session. Children were asked to solve four puzzles of cartoon characters, with three of the puzzles altered to prevent successful completion. Given the chance to rework a puzzle, children could choose to try a challenging puzzle again or to repeat the puzzle already solved. Based on their preferences for challenging versus no-challenge puzzles and their reasons for the choices, children were categorized into learning and performance goal groups.

Results

The proportions of kindergartners holding learning goals in the Caucasian group and the Hispanic group were almost exactly the same. Twenty-one (54%) of Hispanic children and 22 (56%) of Caucasian children held learning goals. According to Fisher's Exact Test (two-tailed), the probability of this result is 1.00, given no difference between groups in the proportions holding learning vs. performance goals.



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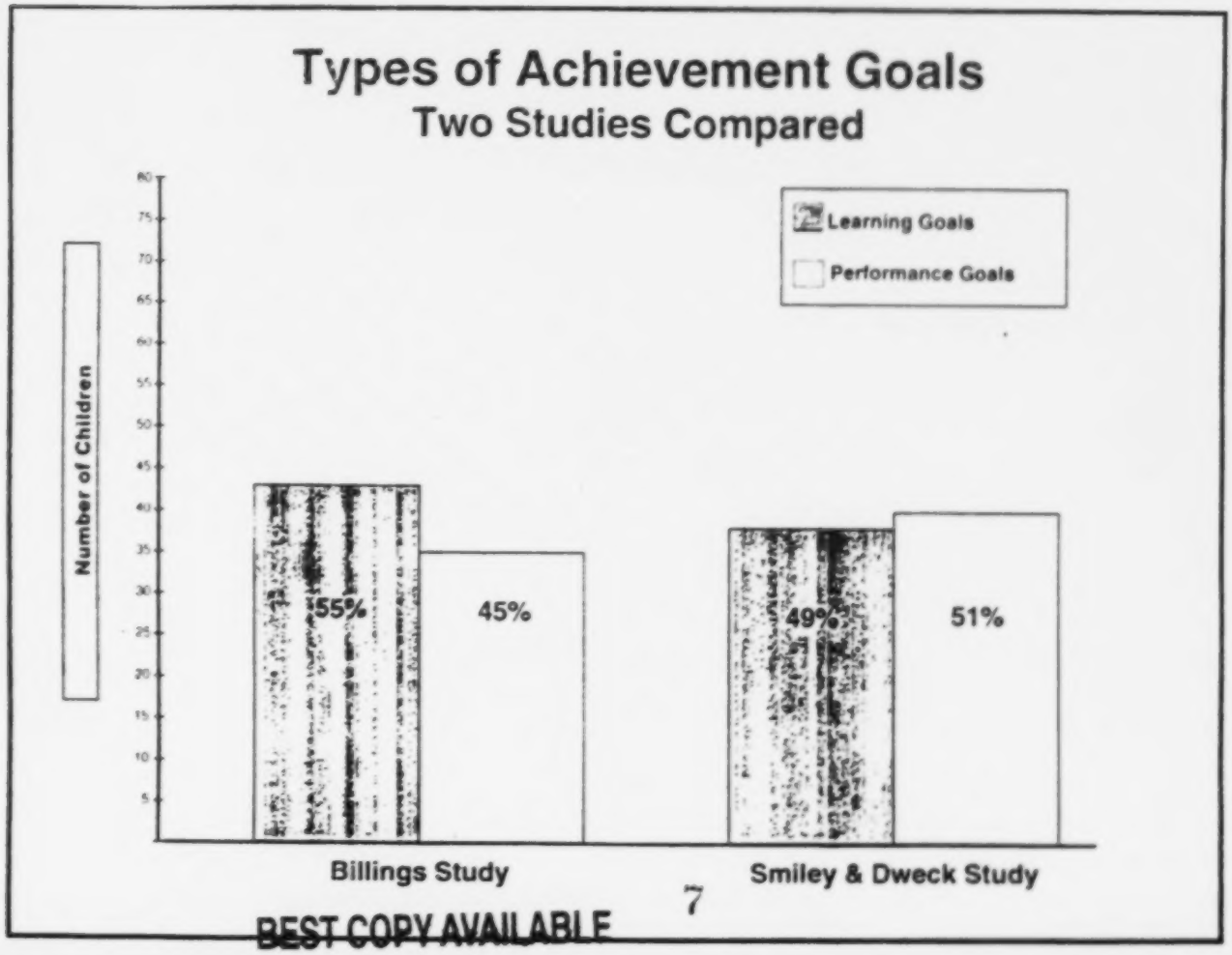
Results

The proportions of students holding learning and performance goals in this study were compared with the results reported in the original study by Smiley and Dweck (1994). In that study, the proportion of children with learning goals was 49%. In the present study this proportion was 55%. The probability of observing such a difference in proportions between studies was .522 using Fisher's Exact Test, indicating that children in both groups were similar in their preferences for learning and performance goals.



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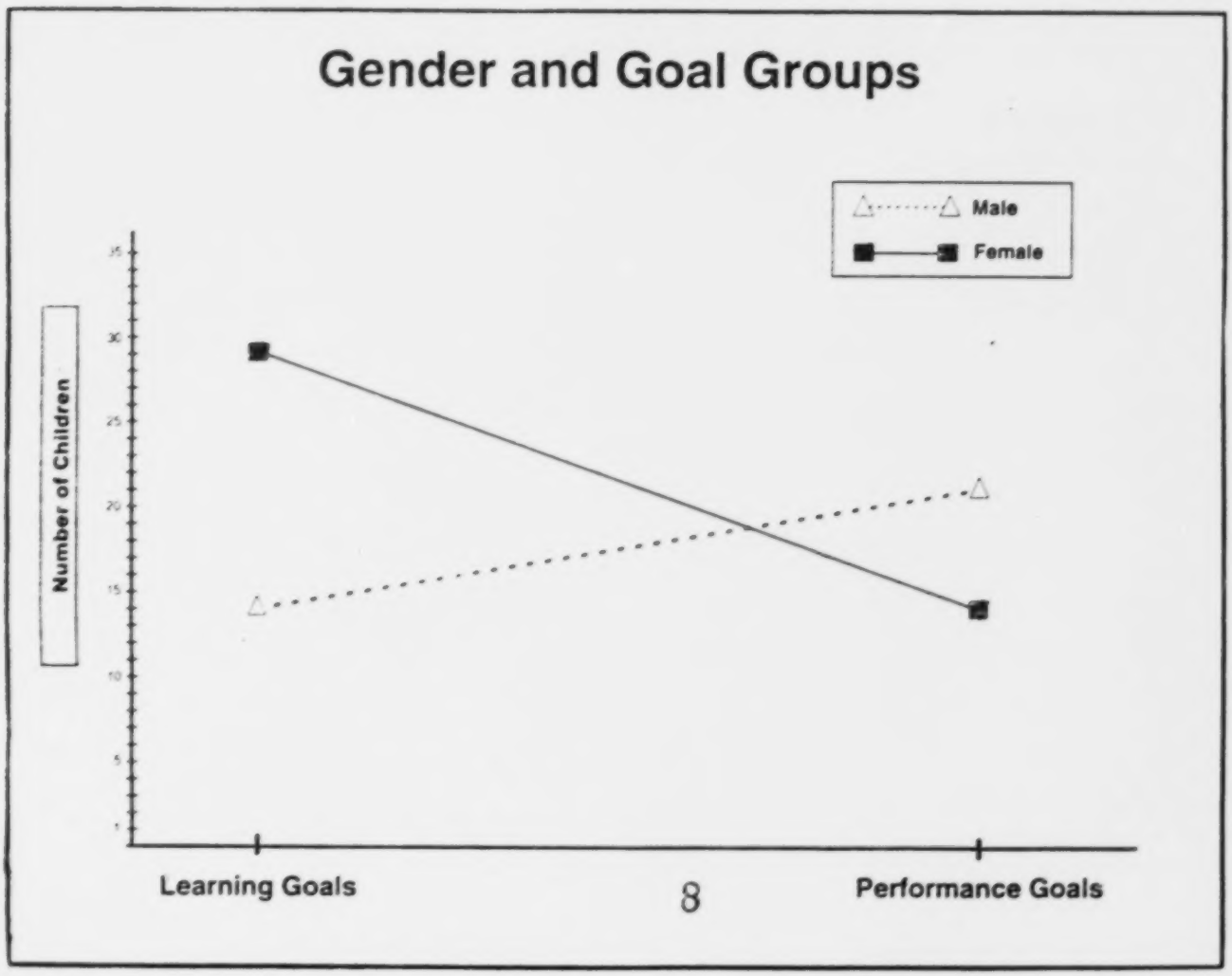
Results

There was a significant and unexpected effect of gender on goal preference, χ^2 (1, N=78) = 5.874, p<.015. Sixty percent of male kindergartners preferred performance goals while only 40% held learning goals. Preferences were reversed for females, with 33% holding performance goals and 67% holding learning goals. The same pattern was observed for males and females in both the Hispanic and Caucasian ethnic groups.



Discussion

- Hispanic kindergartners were found to exhibit patterns of learning and performance goals remarkably similar to those of their Caucasian classmates.

- This replication extends previous research by showing that patterns of learning and performance goals for achievement can generalize across geographic areas, socioeconomic status, and Hispanic and Caucasian ethnic groups.

- Learning goals were held by significantly more females than males. The difference does not appear to be related to ethnicity as the same pattern was observed in both Caucasian and Hispanic children. Since other studies using the same paradigm and participants of similar age have not found significant effects of gender on goal preferences, this result needs further exploration.

- In view of the increasing diversity of school populations in the United States it is important to verify the usefulness of a theory of motivation across cultural groups. This replication showed that educators might more confidently use the concept of learning and performance goals in understanding motivation and achievement in both Hispanic and Caucasian kindergartners.

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